

Masthead Logo

---

Archives Alive

---

3-7-2014

# Merry Christmas Evelyn

Elizabeth Salerno  
*University of Iowa*

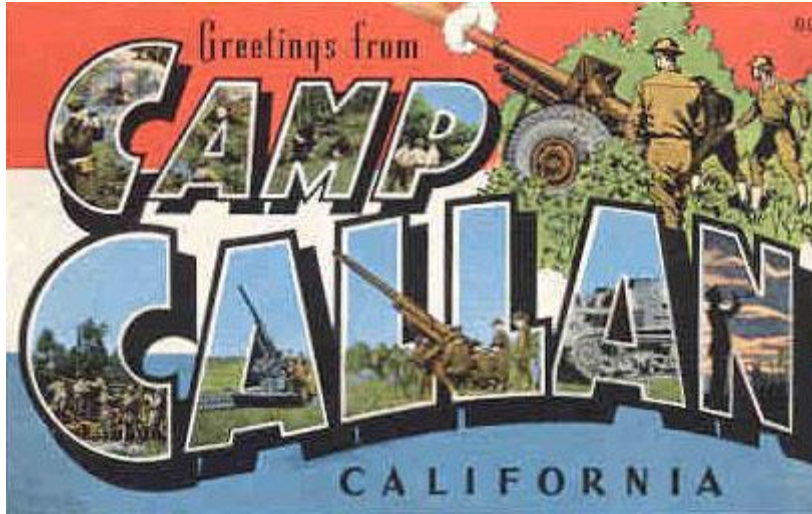
---

Copyright © 2014 Elizabeth Salerno

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#). For more information please contact: [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

# Fred to Evelyn: A love story gone wrong?

Rhetorical:

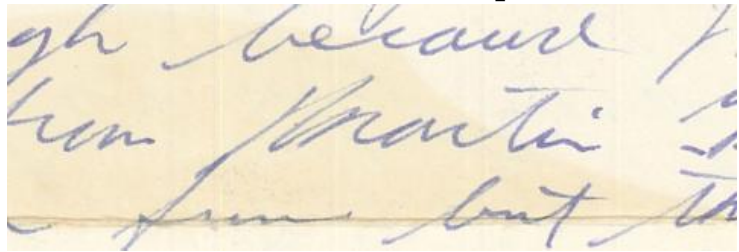


Frederick Biesterfelt was a soldier in World War II, currently stationed at Camp Callan near San Diego, California. On October 15, 1941, he writes a letter to his (presumed) girlfriend Evelyn Birkby telling

her how much he misses her and how much he loves her and how he wishes he could spend just one more minute with her. He “never lets a day pass by without thinking of you and the good times we have had together.” Nearly half of the letter addresses his desire to reunite with Evelyn. It seems like the usual “I miss you and I love you” wartime letter; however, there are some word choices that draw some curiosity from the reader. One example is his monologue about walking along the beach at night thinking about Evelyn. He finishes this portion with the sentence “Well so much for that.” This could be a sign of regret, maybe something that Fred did in the past that caused a break up. It could be possible that Fred and Evelyn are not actually a couple anymore, but Fred may want the relationship to continue. Another example is near the end of the letter. Fred states that he will try and find a school for Evelyn to teach at in California “if you aren't married by that time.” Based on the nature of the letter, we are led to assume that Evelyn and Fred are dating and possibly in a quite serious relationship. He even signs the letter “yours.” However, the previous examples, along with some others, make it seem like they

perhaps are in an “open” relationship or not even dating. Fred even mentions another name, one that I found illegible, but possibly a Martin. Could Martin be a current boyfriend? If that is the case, then another question is raised: Why is Fred writing such a romantic and deep letter to Evelyn if she is no longer pursuing such a relationship with Fred? By today’s standards, that would be called stalking, punishable by significant fines and prison time. It is possible that Fred is trying to mend an open wound, but we are given no indication of such a wound existing.

However, not all the letter discusses Fred’s “relationship” with Evelyn. Fred implies that he has some commanding position in the military with the line “As for an army life in



command...” He mentions that he cannot divulge much detail about what he is doing in the army, which was standard practice at the time. Fred also makes a remark about basic training. He states that “they say we should at least look like soldiers” when training ends, but that “he rather doubts whether I will or not.” This gives a sign of doubt that he feels comfortable with his training and whether or not he will be successful as a soldier. This was also a common feeling among drafted soldiers, where many had backgrounds in farming and manufacturing, not fighting.

The most detail in this letter is used when Fred addresses Evelyn and their previous relationship. When he discusses his time in the army, it is very vague and leaves much to be desired. The emphasis on Fred’s part is on the relationship, which may or may not be ongoing. Fred’s use of the past tense causes doubt in the reader’s mind about the status of the relationship.

## Historical:

Fred mentions in the letter that he is close to San Diego and Hollywood. A return address on the top of the letter reveals that Fred was at Camp Callan, which was one of several military camps used in World War II were located in this area. Camp Callan was primarily used for training troops in anti-artillery warfare to protect the West Coast because the United States government was concerned about the possibility of a direct attack from the Japanese Navy. Ironically, they were right, as the attack on Pearl Harbor would occur just less than two months from the time this letter was written. Whether Fred would then be deployed to Hawaii or overseas in the Pacific, I was not able to find out. And while these troops were preparing for an attack on their homeland, a future “ally” was desperately defending their own homeland 6000 miles away. The Battle of Moscow began within a week of October 15, 1941, and would go on to be one of the most important and bloodiest military campaigns in all of World War II. The Germans had double crossed the Soviet Union and had invaded them. The German army marched to within miles of Moscow, but was then turned back by fierce reinforcements along with a harsh winter right about this time. This would eventually be known as the beginning of the downturn of German rule in Europe and would eventually lead to the overall fall of the Nazi Party.

Fred also writes that some women are coming up from San Diego to dance with the troops at the camp. This was also a common practice during the 1940s, as many women saw entertaining the servicemen as part of their patriotic duty. They all know that “they didn’t have to date them, just have fun with them.” Along with dances, the women partook in scrap drives, bake

sales, and selling war bonds. There was always something to do for the war effort.

Fred mentions Evelyn being a teacher back in Iowa. After some digging I was able to find a newspaper article written by Evelyn herself in 2012



that reminisces on her past teaching. She states in the article that she began teaching in Carlisle, Iowa, a small central Iowa town. However, her next place of teaching was in Tripoli, Iowa, which is also the last place of residence for Fred before he passed away in 1990. It is very likely that Fred lived in Tripoli or had family ties to Tripoli, as many people during this era did not stray far from their hometowns. This is probably where Evelyn and Fred met and began their relationship, whatever that relationship was. Evelyn eventually moved away from Tripoli when she got married in the late 1940s (not to Fred), but Fred came back to Tripoli.

Written By: Nathan Benya

### References:

Birkby, Evelyn. "September Reminds Me of the Years I Taught School." *The Valley News*. Web. 25 Feb. 2014.

"Camp Callan." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 13 Feb. 2014. Web. 26 Feb. 2014.

"Women in Wartime." *San Diego History Center*. Web. 25 Feb. 2014.

"Battle of Moscow." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 22 Feb. 2014. Web. 25 Feb. 2014.